Trends in Community College Enrollment and Completion Data, Issue 5

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This is the fifth in a series of American Association of Community Colleges analyses of trends in community college enrollments and exploration of completion rates. The latter feature graduation rates and outcome measures published by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Student Clearinghouse's completion rates.

Overview and Highlights

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) release annual reports on higher education fall enrollment and student outcomes. ED data are institution-based, whereas the NSC data are based on student-level information. Both use the same postsecondary institutional classifications[i] categorizing community colleges as public 2-year institutions, which facilitates comparisons. As such, they exclude those colleges that confer some four-year degrees, but primarily award associate degrees and certificates—i.e., what most people think of as a community college. For purposes of this report, however, the terms "public 2-year institutions" and "community college" are used interchangeably.

Following the peak enrollment in fall 2010, overall higher education enrollment continued to decline through fall 2017, in some sectors more than others. Four-year public and private non-profit institutions have experienced very small growth over that time. Projections through 2027 show a modest growth in postsecondary enrollment, including at community colleges, but not to the levels experienced in the aftermath of the economic downturn.[1]

Major findings of this report include:

- Between fall 2016 and 2017, the decline in enrollment continued nationwide in community colleges, although the decrease was less pronounced than in previous years for both men and women, all age categories, and regardless of enrollment intensity.
- Community college enrollment is projected to start increasing over the next decade, but not reaching the peak of fall 2011.
- The official IPEDS graduation rate for community colleges, which measures completion of the first-time, full-time cohort for 150% of "normal time," grew by more than 20% in the past decade, from 21.9% to 26.6%.
- The NSC community college completion rate for full-time-only students, which is the most comparable to ED's official graduation rate, is 61%, or more than two times higher than ED's. The NSC tracks students for 6 years rather than ED's 3 years.
- The new ED 8-year completion rate, referred to as an outcome measure, is 30% at the same institution for the cohort of full- time, first-time community college students. Full-time, non-first-time students had the highest completion rate at the same institution, 38%.

Trends in Community College Enrollment

ED collects and reports institutional-level data from postsecondary Title-IV eligible institutions for fall enrollment.[ii] In fall 2017, and for the fourth straight year, overall enrollment in postsecondary institutions declined by about 89,000. This was modest compared to a drop of more than 165,000

[i]The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) classifies postsecondary institutions into nine categories based on control and level. https://surveys.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/VisGlossaryAll.aspx. Control categories are public, private not-for-profit, and private for-profit. The level categories, based on the highest degree awarded, are 4-year and higher (4 year), 2-but-less-than 4-year (2 year), and less than 2-year.

[ii]For the 2017 fall enrollment, the data collection occurred in spring 2018. Another survey collects 12-month unduplicated enrollment for the same institutions.

between 2015 and 2016. Decreases in overall enrollment were primarily driven by declining enrollments at for-profit and public 2-year institutions. Public 2-year college enrollments declined less than 3% for the third consecutive year. Between fall 2016 and fall 2017, enrollment fell by about 112,000. This was three and a half times less than the 389,000 decrease between fall 2015 and 2016. Private, for-profit 4-year institutions experienced a much sharper decline from the previous fall.[2]

The NSC enrollment data are more current than that of ED. At about the same time that ED presents fall 2017 enrollment data, NSC publishes an estimate of fall 2018 enrollment. The NSC fall 2018 enrollment numbers indicate little abatement in declining overall enrollments or community college enrollments. Less enrollment volatility was evident, however, in 4-year public institutions, and a continued sharp enrollment drop in private, for-profit institutions—15.1% since the previous fall.[3] ED and NSC data are comparable in the general direction of changes in enrollment across sectors; however, they differ somewhat in terms of the intensity of the increases and decreases. (Table 1).

While enrollment trends have not been linear in recent years, according to IPEDS the decrease in total enrollment, including at community colleges, has generally eased (Table 1). Some of this is attributable to the more than halving in the enrollment losses at for-profit institutions, from a 14.5% decrease between the fall of 2015 and 2016, to a 7.1% decrease the following fall. The change in community college enrollment has been considerably less drastic during the same period. However, the most recent NSC data, which may be a precursor to the IPEDS fall 2018 enrollment figures, show another dip in overall enrollments and a substantial decline of 3.2%, the largest drop since fall 2015, in community college enrollment. It would be premature, however, to say that this is the beginning of a trend or simply a 1-year increase.

As Table 2 shows, NCS fall enrollment of select groups (gender, age, and enrollment intensity) has fluctuated during this period. Traditional age student enrollment moved into positive territory with an uptick, however small, of 0.3%, only to decline again by a factor of 10 (3.0%) in the past year. Not shown is the 6% rise in enrollment of students under the age of 18 in the past year, indicating the importance of dual enrollment programs to community college enrollments. Little separated the enrollment patterns of men and women as well as those attending part-time versus full-time between fall 2016 and 2017. This changed be-

Table 1: Percent Changes in Fall Enrollment by Select Institutions, 2015-2018

Percent Change from Previous Year						
	Total Fall Enrollment		4-Year Public Institutions		2-Year Public Institutions	
	IPEDS	NSC	IPEDS	NSC	IPEDS	NSC
Fall 2015	-1.3%	-1.7%	1.2%	0.8%	-2.8%	-2.9%
Fall 2016	-0.8%	-1.4%	4.7%	0.2%	-6.0%	-2.6%
Fall 2017	-0.4%	-1.0%	1.3%	-0.2%	-2.3%	-1.7%
Fall 2018		-1.7%		0.0%		-3.2%

Table 2: Percent Changes from Prior Year in NSC Fall Enrollment at Public 2-Year Institutions by Gender, Age, and Enrollment Intensity, 2016-2018

	Gender		Age		Enrollment Intensity	
	Men	Women	24 and Under	Over 24	Part-Time	Full-Time
Fall 2016	-3.2%	-3.1%	-1.1%	-5.2%	-2.2%	-4.5%
Fall 2017	-2.0%	-1.5%	0.3%	-4.3%	-1.9%	-1.5%
Fall 2018	-4.6%	-2.1%	-3.0%	-3.5%	-2.2%	-4.7%

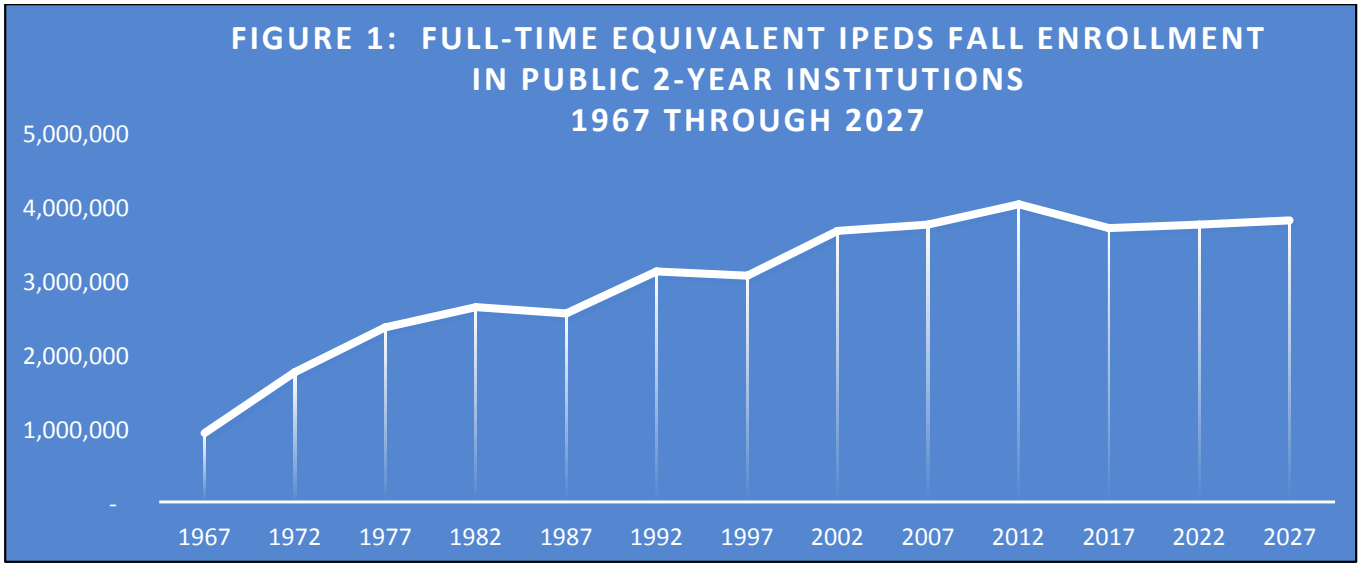
tween fall 2017 and 2018. In fall 2018, the decline in male enrollment was more than double that of women and similarly, full-time attendees declined at twice the rate part-time students.

Projections

ED projects that starting in fall 2017, the full-time equivalent enrollment at public 2-year institutions will cease to decline and inch up steadily for the next decade through 2027. At least for fall 2018 that prediction does not appear accurate, based on NSC data. According to ED, the rate of increase is projected to be anemic, at less than a fraction of 1% annually, or a cumulative increase of 2.8% over 10 years (Figure 1). After rising consistently since 1995 (2,994,592 FTE), the enrollment at public 2-year institutions peaked in fall 2010, when the FTE was 4,382,957. In 2027, the FTE at these institutions is projected to be 3,801,000.[4]

What Does Completion Count?

The importance of completing a program of study and earning a postsecondary credential in today's and tomorrow's economy is virtually without dispute. However, there is no universal measure of program completion. The U.S. Department of Education is statutorily compelled by the Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act (PL—101-542) of 1990[5] to require Title-IV eligible postsecondary institutions to report graduation rates as defined in statute, the generally cited "official" IPEDS graduation rates. They include a cohort of first-time, full-time certificate and degree-seeking students who complete their programs within



150% of the "normal" time to completion. For 2-year associate degree programs, therefore, the graduation rate counts students who complete within 3 years. The graduation rate does not include either students who transfer in or, more importantly, those who transfer out—a critical exclusion from the community college perspective.

Given the realities facing community college students, the 3-year window for them to complete 2-year programs is clearly inadequate. AACC strongly supports statutory creation of a community college graduation rate of 300% of the normal time to completion, and the inclusion of transfers-out. This would more accurately measure community college student success and align with the AACC-led Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA).[6]

To address the flaws in this narrowly defined graduation rate, ED added several new cohorts for which completion is measured under new Outcome Measures. In late 2018, ED released data from both the Outcome Measures (OM)[7] and Graduation Rate surveys that are part of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). The long-awaited OM help paint a more accurate picture of student success at community colleges than the graduation rate.

Outcome Measures (OM) consist of four student cohorts, including the historic one used for the graduation rate, namely, full-time, first-time students. The other three cohorts include part-time, first-time; full-time, non-first-time; and part-time, non-first-time students. Unlike the graduation rate, which tracks completion at 150% of normal time, OM tracks completion at two points: 6 years and 8 years after students matriculated.

Graduation and 6-Year Completion Rates

Between 2010 and 2014, the official ED public 2-year graduation rate, which follows first time, full time students until 150% of normal time to completion, increased substantially, from 21.1% to 26.6% (Figure 2). Although causality cannot be determined, this increase is almost certainly due in part to community colleges' increased emphasis on student completion.

ED also is now reporting graduation rates for students with different types of student financial aid. For cohort years 2011 and 2014, depending on the level of institution, completion rates are calculated for Pell Grant recipients, subsidized loan borrowers who are not Pell Grant recipients, and students who are neither Pell Grant recipients nor subsidized loan borrowers. Pell Grant recipients at 2-year public institutions graduated at a lower rate than those who borrowed direct subsidized loans and those who neither received Pell Grants nor took out subsidized loans, 23% compared to 27.4% and 31.5%, respectively (Figure 3). This is not surprising; Pell Grant students are low-income students, who consistently complete college at lower rates than more affluent individuals.

Completion rates calculated by NSC differ from ED's graduation rates. Regardless of program length, NSC tracks 6-year outcomes. Another major difference between the two rates is the institution(s) used in the completion/graduation measure. ED's graduation rate uses only one institution, the institution at which a student started college. In comparison, NSC tracks students across all institutions attended during the 6-year period.

According to the NSC's completion report[8] (Figure 4), 28% of all community college students—full-time and less than full-time--who started in the fall of 2012 completed their program at the same institution within 6 years. An additional 3.3% completed at a different 2-year institution and 8.1% completed at a 4-year institution. All told, within 6 years, about four out of 10 community college students, regardless of attendance intensity, completed a program either at the starting institution or a different institution. An additional 16% of these students were still enrolled in a community college or 4-year institution after 6 years.

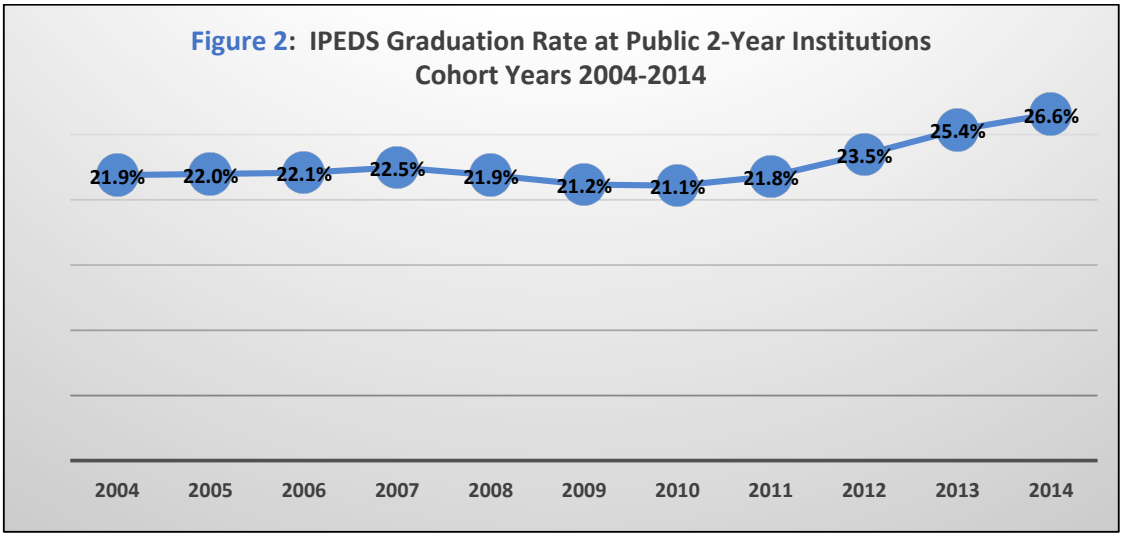


Figure 2: IPEDS Graduation Rate at Public 2-Year Institutions
Cohort Years 2004-2014
21.9%
22.0%
22.1%
22.5%
21.9%
21.2%
21.1%
21.8%
23.5%
25.4%
26.6%
2004
2005
2006
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014

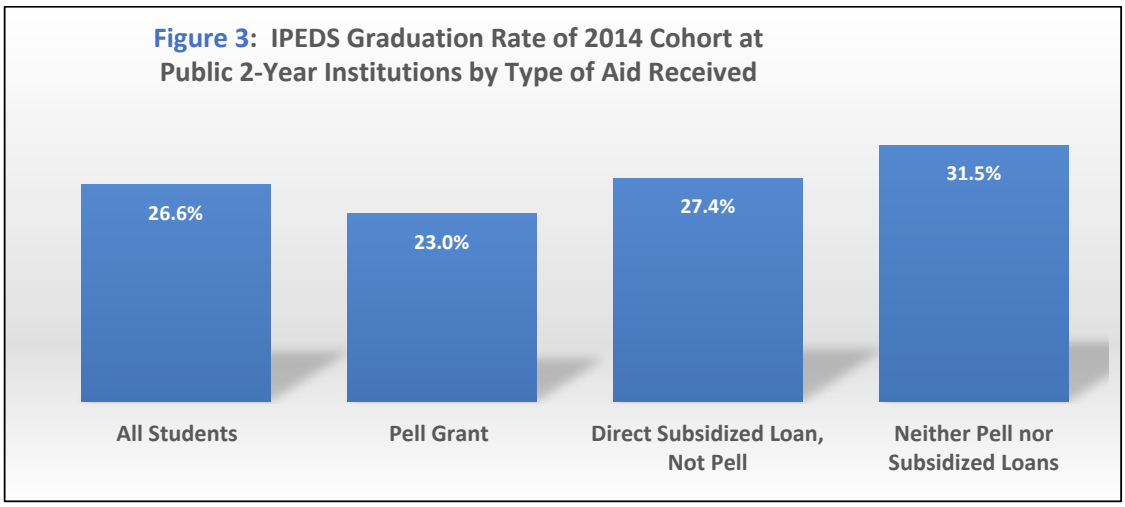


Figure 3: IPEDS Graduation Rate of 2014 Cohort at
Public 2-Year Institutions by Type of Aid Received
26.6%
23.0%
27.4%
31.5%
All Students
Pell Grant
Direct Subsidized Loan, Not Pell
Neither Pell nor Subsidized Loans

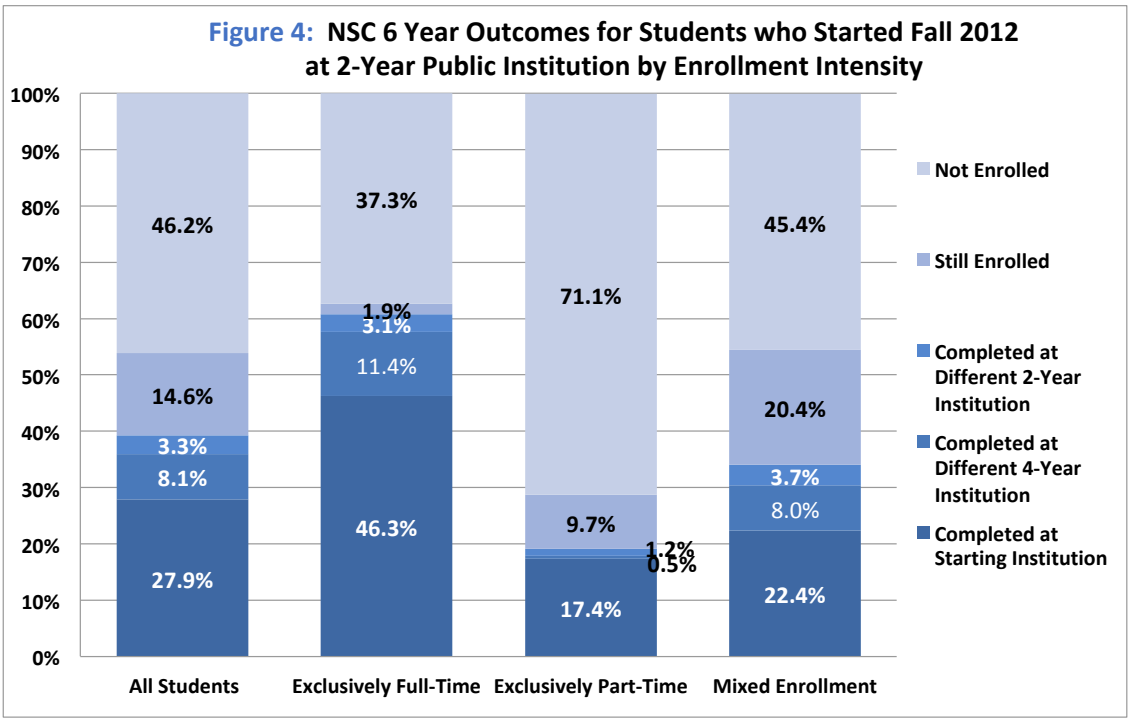


Figure 4: NSC 6 Year Outcomes for Students who Started Fall 2012
at 2-Year Public Institution by Enrollment Intensity
100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
46.2%
14.6%
3.3%
8.1%
27.9%
37.3%
1.9%
3.1%
11.4%
46.3%
71.1%
9.7%
1.2%
0.5%
17.4%
45.4%
20.4%
3.7%
8.0%
22.4%
All Students
Exclusively Full-Time
Exclusively Part-Time
Mixed Enrollment
Not Enrolled
Still Enrolled
Completed at Different 2-Year Institution
Completed at Different 4-Year Institution
Completed at Starting Institution

Figure 5: Graduation Rates of First-Time, Full-Time Students Who Start at Public 2-Year Institutions 2012 (NSC - 300%) and 2013 Cohorts (IPEDS - 100%, 150% and 200%)

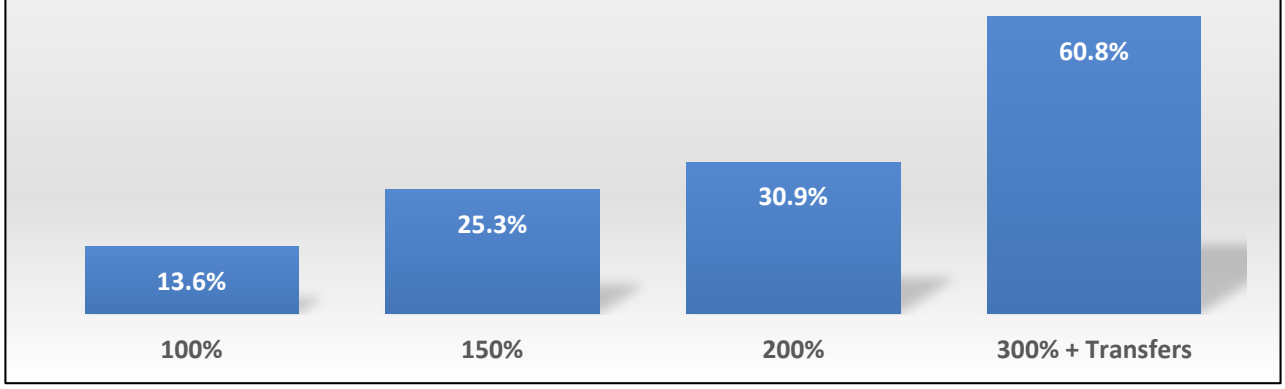
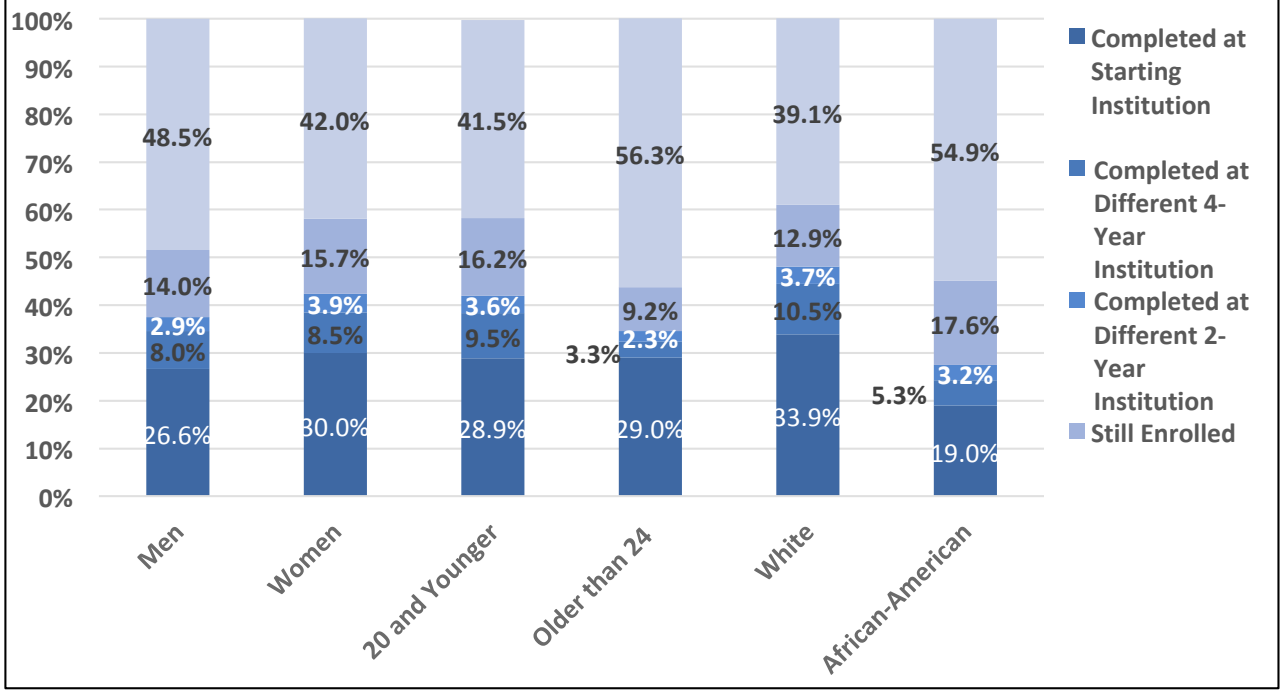


Figure 6: NSC Six-Year Outcomes for Students Who Started Fall 2012 at Public 2-Year Institutions by Sex, Age, and Race



The completion rate was much higher for community college students who attended exclusively full-time—46.3% at the same institution. Using a 6-year window instead of the "official" 3-year window (150% of normal time to completion) to measure completion resulted in a 20% increase in the completion rate (i.e., ED's 26.6% graduation rate versus NCS's 46.3% completion rate). The completion rate at any institution for full-time students, including transfers, is almost 61% (Figure 5). This level of student success is only faintly understood by policymakers, let alone the public.

The 6-year completion rate differed by student sex, age, and race as follows (Figure 6): (1) women had a higher completion rate than men—42.4% and 37.5%, respectively; (2) adult learners (those over age 24) had a lower completion rate than those 20 or younger (but higher than students between ages 20 and 24 —28.6%), 34.5% compared to 42.3%, respectively; and (3) white students had a 20% higher completion rate than African American students, 48.1% versus 27.5%. Attending part time lowered the completion rate across all these student categories.

State Differences

There is much state variation within the national completion rate. According to the NSC, for the fall 2012 cohort,[9] of the 41 states whose public 2-year institutions were included in the reported completion rates (N=41), 24 were greater than the overall rate of 39.3% and 17 had lower rates. In four states the completion rate exceeded 50%: South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa.

In Minnesota, 82.3% of full-time community college students completed within 6 years, compared to the national 60.8% completion rate. In nine states, more than seven out of 10 students attending full-time completed their programs (Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota, Illinois, Florida, Wisconsin, California, Virginia, and Iowa).

Georgia had the highest completion rate for those who attended exclusively part-time, 39.9%, which was higher than the national completion rate for all students, regardless of attendance intensity (39.3%). Nationally, 19.2% of exclusively part-time students complete, but in four states more than a third of those students completed their programs within 6 years (Georgia, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Kentucky).

States also varied with respect to the percentage of students who completed their program at the entering institution or transferred and completed at another 2- or 4-year institution, as well as by age and sex. South Dakota was the only state where more than half of community college students completed at the starting institution. At the other extreme, only 18.4% of students attending Arizona public-2-year institutions completed at their original institution.

South Dakota was the only state with completion rates above 50% for all age groups, younger than 20, between 20 and 24, and older than 24 (70.6%, 57.0%, and 53.5%, respectively). The traditional age students, those entering college right after high school, had the highest completion rate. In addition to South Dakota, eight other states had completion rates above 50% for those younger than 20: North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Florida, Montana, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and Illinois. Mississippi was not far behind at 49.6%.

For the 20- to 24-year-old group, only two states—South Dakota and North Dakota—had completion rates above 50% (57.0% and 50.2%, respectively). Students older than 24 had completion rates greater than 50% in three states: South Dakota (53.5%), Georgia (51.7%), and Minnesota (51.4%), with Wisconsin being nosed out by a fraction of one percent (49.7%).

Women had a higher overall completion rate than men, 42.3% compared to 37.5%. Women also out-performed men in all but two of the states for which there were data. Men in Arkansas and Georgia completed at a higher rate than women, both by about 2%. In 10 states, more than half of women completed their programs in 6 years at either their entering institution or one into which they transferred: South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Montana, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Florida, Kansas, and Illinois.[iii] Men had completion rates of 50% or higher in only three states: South Dakota, North Dakota, and Minnesota (64.6%, 59.0%, and 52,6%, respectively). Close behind were Wisconsin (49.5%) and Iowa (49.3%).

[iii]Kansas and Montana were designated by NSC as states with only medium (80-89%) historical coverage; the others were states with high historical coverage of 90% or higher. https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/NSCSignatureReport16_StateSupp.pdf

Eight-Year Outcome Measures and Completion Rates

For the 8-year IPEDS Outcome Measures survey,[iv] institutions provided information on the 2009-2010 cohort. Within an 8-year window, students could have completed their program at the entering institution, still be enrolled at that institution, transferred to another institution, or have an unknown status. For the first time, the National Student Clearinghouse also produced 8-year completion rates to supplement the fall 2010 cohort data.[10]

When students are tracked for 8 years, a much higher percentage of community college completions are reported. Not-surprisingly, full-time students graduate at higher rates than those attending part time. First-time, full-time students had a graduation rate of slightly more than 21% when measured at the 3-year mark but had an 8-year completion rate of 29.7%, a 40% increase (Table 3). It is also encouraging that, at public 2-year institutions, full-time, non-first-time students, also referred to as transfer-in students, completed at higher rates than full-time, first-time students. This finding cuts across all higher education.[11]

According to NSC completion data for the fall 2010 cohort,[12] a higher percentage of exclusively full-time students complete at their institution within 6 years than full-time, first-time students after 8 years under ED's Outcome Measures (OM) data, 41.6% compared to 29.7%.[13] The difference in the definition of full-time attendance may explain this finding. The NSC definition of full-time students includes the term "exclusively" to denote that they are enrolled full-time every term. Full-time students in both ED's Outcome Measures and graduation rate data are enrolled full time for the term they enter the institution but may subsequently attend less than full time. In effect, a more similar although not identical NSC comparison group for the OM cohorts would be those with a mixed enrollment pattern.

ED's outcomes measures now include attainment of a certificate or specific degree at 4, 6, and 8 years. Nonetheless, without inclusion of transfer out, OM remain less comprehensive than AACC's Voluntary Framework of Accountability, which is also an institutional-level data collection. In addition to the lack of transfer information, unlike the VFA, the OM do not include progress measures or otherwise document how many students who did not complete the program had completed one or more terms or earned a certain number of credits at the institution.

Table 3: IPEDS Outcome Measures at Public 2-Year Institutions by Enrollment Status, Cohort Year 2009-10

	Completed	Still Enrolled at Entering Institution	Transferred to Another Institution	Enrollment /Transfer Status Unknown
Full-time, first-time	29.7%	2.0%	24.4%	43.9%
Part-time, first-time	16.2%	2.1%	23.8%	57.9%
Full-time, non-first-time	38.4%	1.2%	30.5%	29.9%
Part-time, non-first-time	20.8%	1.5%	36.8%	40.9%
Overall	25.0%	1.7%	30.6%	42.7%

[iv] In addition to the 8-year Outcome Measures, there also are 4-year and 6-year measures for certain outcomes.

Figure 7 illustrates the extent to which the longer time used to measure completion, the greater number of associate degrees are attained at public 2-year institutions. Attending full time, however, provides a greater boost to associate degree attainment. For each window of time, the associate degree attainment was about twice as high for full-time than part-time students. It was nearly three times higher for the first-time cohort.

The highest associate degree attainment cohort is that of full-time, non-first-time students. The percentage increase in the students who earned an associate degree within 6 years versus 4 years is much larger than the difference between those taking between 6 and 8 years to attain the degree.

According to a Center for American Progress report using 8-year OM data on attainment for low-income (defined as Pell Grant recipient) students,[14] full-time, first-time Pell recipients at public 2-year institutions complete at 7.3% rate higher than their non-Pell counterparts, which was not the case for Pell grant recipients overall (i.e., regardless of attendance intensity). Pell Grant recipients also are more likely than non-Pell students to earn an associate degree within 8-years at public 2-year institutions.

With the statutory ban on student-level data still in place, ED is prohibited from tracking students across institutions. NSC, on the other hand, has a student-level data base for almost all degree-granting institutions and can measure completion based on the student rather than the institution. For the first time this year, NSC tracked student outcomes for 8 years.[15] Several key findings (Figure 8) emerged from examining 6-year and 8-year completion rates. First, the overall college completion rate increased by 15% by tracking students for an additional 2-years. Second, the increase in overall completion between 6-year and 8-year completers is mostly due to the increase in students who transferred to another institution, particularly 4-year institutions, and subsequently completed their programs (an increase of 35%).

AACC strongly supports lifting the ban on a federal, national student unit record data system (SURDS). A SURDS would provide more accurate federal student outcome data because, among other things, it would allow cross-institutional tracking. In addition, SURDS would reduce institutional administrative burden of student-based data collection. The fate of the ban rests with Congress and the Higher Education Act (HEA) reau-

Figure 7: IPEDS Associate Degree Attainment at 4, 6, and 8 Years After Entering Public 2-Year Institution, Cohort Year 2009-10

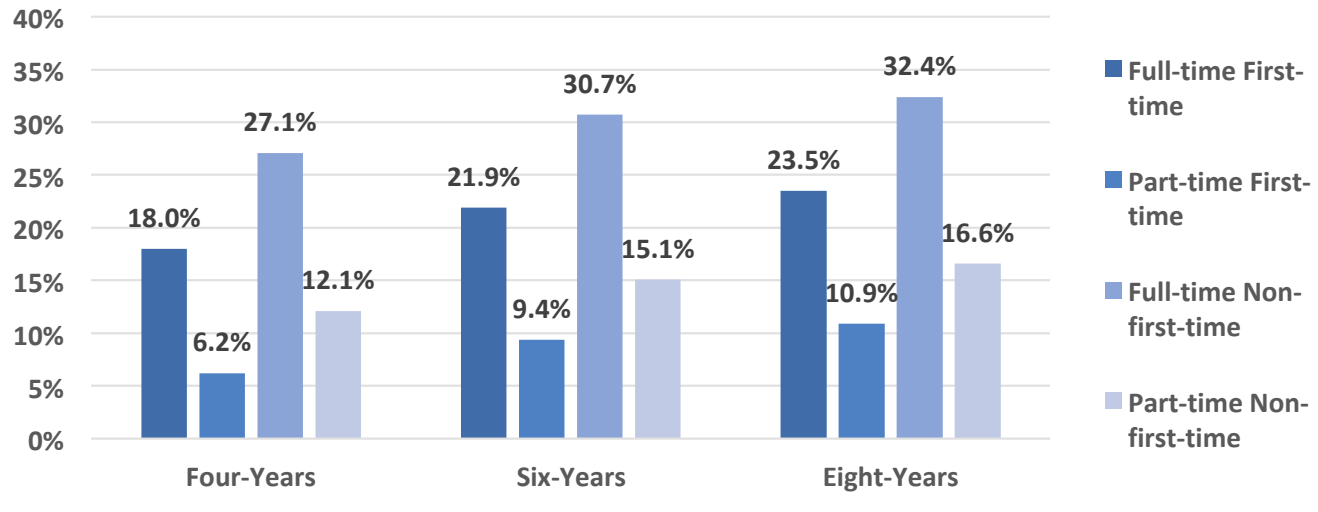
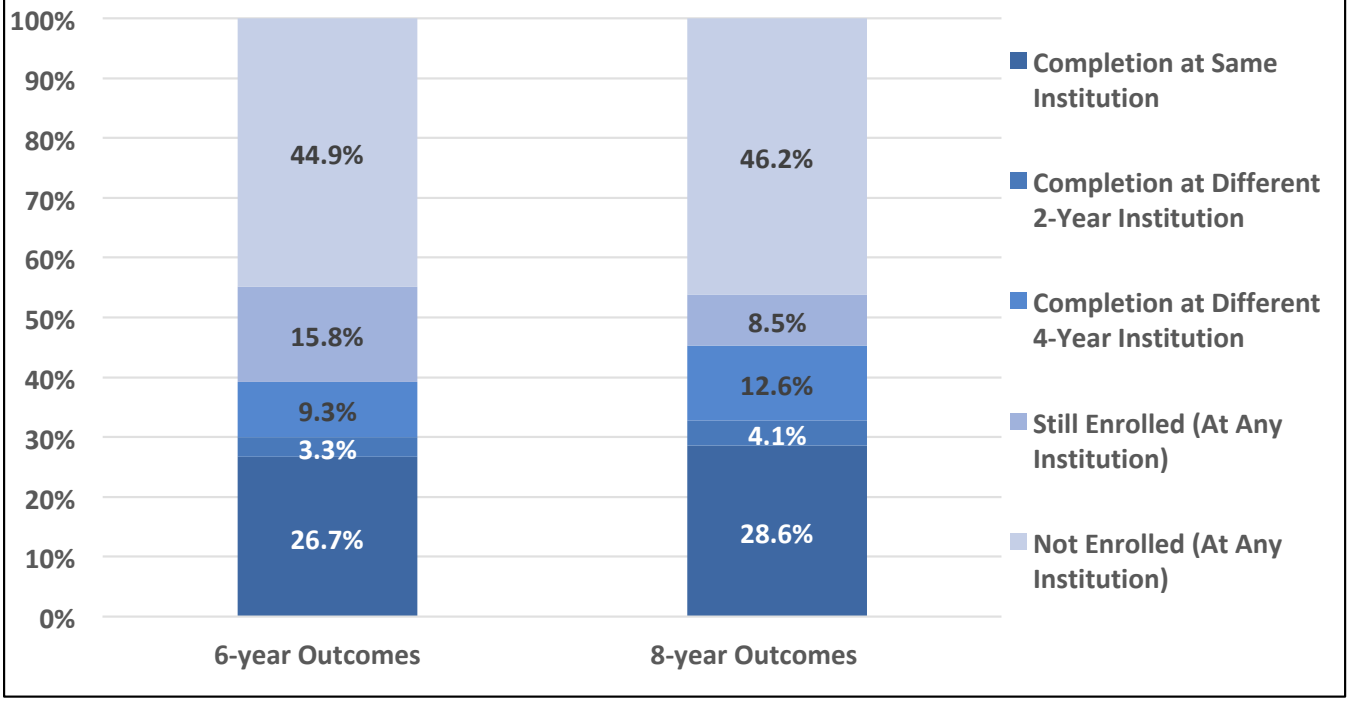


Figure 8: NSC 6-Year and 8-Year Overall Outcomes by Starting Public 2-Year Institutions, Fall 2010 Cohort



thorization. Leaders of both the House and Senate committees that oversee the HEA have voiced their eagerness to introduce and see enacted comprehensive HEA reauthorization legislation.[16]

Factors Affecting Changes in Enrollment and Completion Rates

Since the first in this series of monographs, the trend in community college enrollments has continued in a downward direction, albeit at a less-pitched slope. To address this and to expand access and foster more college going, a couple of strategies have been pursued, dual enrollment and promise programs.

Many states, localities, and even institutions are offering free tuition and fees at community colleges (some to 4-year institutions) or seriously considering doing so. According to the College Promise Campaign, there are more than 300 communities in 44 states across the country that have college promise programs. Early data indicate that these programs do spur enrollment growth, but not evenly across states, or income and racial groups.

Dual enrollment also has increased but is not captured in the enrollment numbers provided above. ED data show that between 2002 and 2010, dual enrollment students grew by 67%, reaching 1.4 million in the 2010-11 academic year.[17] Community colleges have a large market share of dually enrolled students, up to 69% in 2015.[18] The number of dually-enrolled high school students is estimated to have increased since then.[19] A recent examination of these dual enrollment programs also show that the growth has been uneven across the states.[20] While studies have shown that these programs have been effective in boosting both high school and college completion of dually enrolled students, not all students have benefited equally from dual enrollment. It turns out that the most academically advanced students, those most

likely to attend college, are the ones who meet dual enrollment eligibility requirements.[21] There is also great variation in the rate of dually enrolled students earning college credentials by state and family income.[22]

The completion story has been relatively consistent, but in an opposite trajectory. Completions and completion rates, however measured, are moving up. Unfortunately, the completion rates are not equally distributed among all student populations. Gaps remain among races and ethnic groups, the sexes, and different age groups. Achieving equity is an important part of the completion agenda across the higher education sector.

The U.S. economy has been experiencing an extraordinary period of growth since the Great Recession. The February 2019 unemployment rate hit 3.8%, not seen since 1968. College enrollments generally move inversely to the economy: when the economy deteriorates, enrollments increase, and vice versa. Increasing private sector demand for a more educated workforce will create a push for greater college enrollment, as the projections demonstrate. Community colleges will continue to have an edge over other sectors both in affordability and agility to start or expand programs in high-demand fields.

ENDNOTES

[1]Hussar, W.J., and Bailey, T.M. (2019). Projections of Education Statistics to 2027 (NCES 2019-001). U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from: https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019001.pdf.

[2]Ginder, S.A., Kelly-Reid, J.E., and Mann, F.B. (2018). Enrollment and Employees in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2017; and Financial Statistics and Academic Libraries, Fiscal Year 2017: First Look (Provisional Data) (NCES 2019- 021rev). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from: http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch.

[3]National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Term Enrollment Estimates Fall 2018, December 13, 2018. Retrieved from:https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CurrentTermEnrollmentReport-Fall-2018-3.pdf

[4]Ibid, footnote 1.

[5]Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act, Public Law 101-542, November 8, 1990. Retrieved from: https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-104/pdf/STATUTE-104-Pg2381.pdf

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